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ABSTRACT

While research with divorced adults has revealed a positive correlation between their social support networks and their adjustment after divorce, there has been little direct examination of the influence of the child's support network on the child's adjustment to parental divorce. The relationship of social network variables to child adjustment in one-parent families was examined in 119 6- to 10-year-old eldest children who were living with their separated or divorced custodial mothers. Mothers rated their children on the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist, and provided information about the child's quality and frequency of contact with various members of his or her social network. Children (N=94) rated themselves on the Child Depression Inventory. Multiple regression analyses were conducted using one criterion variable (a measure of psychopathology of the child) and ten predictor variables (time since parents' separation; child's age; and both the quality and quantity of the child's contact with peers, other adults, the custodial mother, and the non-custodial father) for each analysis. The results revealed that only the network quality measures were significant predictors of child adjustment. Sex differences were also found, with boys' interactions with peers and the custodial mother more salient, while interactions with the non-custodial father and other adults were more salient for girls. (Author/NRB)

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Social Networks and Child Adjustment in Single-Parent Families

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship of social network variables to child adjustment in one-parent families. The sample consisted of 119 six to ten year old eldest children whose mothers were separated or divorced. Mothers provided ratings of the child on the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist, and information about the child's quality and frequency of contact with various members of his or her social network. A subsample of 94 of these children also rated themselves on the Child Depression Inventory. Multiple regression analyses revealed that only the network quality measures were significant predictors of child adjustment. Sex differences were also noted, with boys' interactions with peers and the custodial mother more salient, while interactions with the non-custodial father and other adults were more salient for girls.

Social Networks and Child Adjustment in Single-Parent Families

In recent years there has been considerable interest in the relationship of social support networks and the psychological adjustment of adults. In general, it has been found that an adequate support network is positively correlated with emotional health and the capacity to handle stressors (Caplan, 1974; Henderson, 1977). In the subpopulation of divorced adults, social supports and an active social life are also associated with positive adjustment (McLanahan, Wedemeyer & Adelberg, 1981; Spanier & Casto, 1979). Further, investigators have noted that decreases in the stability of the social network from pre-divorce to one year after the divorce are predictive of poor adjustment and low self-concept in adults (Daniel-Mohring & Berger, 1984).

While there has also been considerable research on factors which affect the adjustment of children following divorce, this literature has tended to focus on the interactions of both the custodial and non-custodial parents with the child, the relationship of the ex-spouses and its bearing on the child's functioning, and the particular characteristics of the child (Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, there has been little direct examination of the influence of the child's social network on adjustment following divorce.

The present study explored the social networks of children living in families of separation and divorce. Both the number of contacts and the quality of these interactions were examined as predictors of the mother's

rating of the child on a problem checklist, and of the child's self-report on a depression measure. Since the child's age, sex, and the amount of time elapsed since the parents' separation have been noted to have a bearing on the child's adjustment (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), the impact of these variables was also assesed.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 119 children who were participating with their custodial mothers in a larger study of parent-child interactions. Families were recruited for the larger study from newspaper and media advertising and from referrals to an outpatient mental health center. In the present sample, all children were between 6-10 years of age and were the eldest child in each family. Mothers were all separated or divorced and in each case was the only adult living in the home. The average time since separation was 51.2 months (SD=30.5), the mean age of the mother was 31.7 (SD=7.8), average monthly income was $1,353 (SD=1,127), and average education of the mother was 13.3 years (SD=2.0). There was an average of 1.6 children per family (SD=0.9). There were 60 boys and 59 girls in the sample, with an average age of 8.7 years.

Procedure

Mothers who responded to recruitment advertising and who volunteered to participate in the study were mailed the study instruments. Mothers completed the present study measures at home and returned them by mail. They received

$8 for completing this phase of the project. Measures included the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1983), a demographic questionnaire, and a child social network questionnaire in which the mother estimated the number of contacts per month by the child with peers, other adults, the non-custodial father and herself. She also provided ratings of the quality of these contacts, each on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from very poor to excellent.

In the second phase of the study, a subsample of 94 mothers and children completed a number of interaction tasks in a lab setting. Following this, the child completed the 21-item Child Depression Inventory (Kovacs & Beck, 1977). This instrument is a self-report measure for children which parallels the adult Beck Depression Inventory.

Results

The data were analyzed with hierarchial multiple regression procedures. In each analysis the criterion variable was a measure of psychopathology of the child, using the RBPC scores in one set of analyses, and the CDI in the other set. For each analysis the ten predictor variables were time since parents separation, age of the child, and both the quality and quantity of the child's contact with peers, other adults, the custodial mother and the non-custodial father. Means and standard deviations for these social network quality and quantity variables are reported in Table 1. The data in this table are reported by sex of the child.

Insert Table 1 about here.

In each regression analysis, the child's age and the number of months since the parents' separation were entered simultaneously on the first step as control variables. In the second step, the four network quality variables were simultaneously entered. The four frequency of contact variables were then entered simultaneously as a third and final block. This procedure was followed for the analysis of both RBPC scores and the CDI scores.

Results of the regression of RBPC data on the control and network variables are presented in Table 2. Using the ten predictor variables, the

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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overall equation was highly significant (multiple R=.599, p<.001), accounting for almost 36% of the variance in RBPC scores (R^2=.359). Further examination revealed that the block of network quality variables accounted for essentially all of the variance in RBPC scores. The control variables, time and age, accounted for only 0.5% of the variance, yet when the quality variables were entered, the explained variance increased to 34.7%. Examining individual network variables revealed that the quality of contact with peers and with the custodial mother were the most salient variables for explaining the problem checklist score (F(10,100)=4.457; p<.037 for peers, and F(10,100)=11.947; p< .001 for mother respectively). The four frequency of contact variables added little to the prediction beyond that by the quality variables. Also, no single contact variable was a significant predictor.

To explore possible sex differences, stepwise analyses of RBPC scores were conducted first on the subsample of boys, and then on the subsample of

girls. For boys, only the quality of contact with the mother and quality of contact with the peers entered the equation. These two variables accounted for 34% of the variance in boys' scores ($F(2,57)=16.4$; $p < .001$). For girls, quality of contact with the non-custodial father and quality of interactions with other adults predicted 37% of the variance in RBPC scores ($F(2,56)=18.1$; $p < .001$). No other variables entered the prediction equation. Figure 1 graphically displays these findings by presenting plots of the beta weights for each of the four types of network relationships.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 3 about here.

Results of the regression of CDI data on the control and network variables are presented in Table 3. Using the ten predictor variables, the overall equation was highly significant (multiple $R=.523$; $p<.003$), accounting for over 26% of the variance in CDI scores ($R^2=.262$). Further examination revealed that the block of network quality variables accounted for most of the variance in CDI scores, as was also the case with the RBPC data. The control variables time and age accounted for only 4% of the variance, yet when the quality variables were entered, the explained variance increased to 20.8%. Examining the individual network variables revealed that the quality of contact with other adults was the most salient variable for explaining the child's depression score ($F(10,80)=9.957$; $p<.002$). It is also apparent from Table 3 that the frequency of contact variables did not contribute significantly to predicting CDI scores.

To explore possible sex differences, stepwise analyses of CDI scores were conducted first on the subsample of boys, and then on the subsample of

girls. Analyses on the CDI measure revealed that for boys, only quality of contact with the mother was significant (15% of variance; $F(1,46)=8.3$; $p < .006$). For girls, only the quality of contact with other adults entered. This variable alone accounted for 19% of the variance $F(1,44)=10.5$; $p<.002$) in girls' CDI scores. Refer to Figure 2 for a visual display of these findings using beta weights for each of the four types of relationships.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Discussion

The present findings suggest that at least for latency-aged single-parent children, the child's interpersonal relationships are more salient for adjustment than are either the child's age or time since the parents' breakup. Moreover, the quality of these interactions appears to be the critical factor, rather than the actual amount of contact. These findings parallel those of studies of the social networks of divorced adults, in which positive interactions with peers appear to moderate the level of depression and psychological distress (Leavy, 1983; Pett, 1982).

Of particular interest are the sex differences which emerged in the data. While good quality interactions were significantly associated with fewer behavior problems for both sexes, for the girls the interactions with the non-custodial father and other adults outside the family were more critical. For boys, however, same-age peers and the custodial mother were the more significant members of the social network. Regarding self-reported depression, a similar pattern emerged. Again, quality of contact with the

mother was the single best predictor of boys' depression levels, while for girls the same was true for adults other than the parents.

One could speculate that good quality interactions with an adult of the opposite sex are an integral component of the child's adjustment to the single-parent situation. One improvement of the present would be to further discriminate the various members of the child's social network to determine whether this is so. For example, it would be helpful to know whether the "other adults" found to be important regarding girls adjustment in this study were other relatives, teachers, males or females, etc. Also, it would be important in future research to include other sources of data regarding the child's social network in addition to parental report, since the present data could be confounded by the mother's own expectations of what the various relationships should be like.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Network Variables

Variable	Boys		Girls	
	M	SD	M	SD
Frequency Variables				
Mother	6.67	.81	6.74	.86
Father	3.00	1.70	2.84	1.79
Peers	5.67	1.36	5.52	1.36
Other Adults	5.50	1.43	5.13	1.46
Quality Variables				
Mother	5.69	1.36	5.61	1.29
Father	4.53	1.83	4.30	1.82
Peers	5.13	1.35	5.04	1.23
Other Adults	5.33	1.36	5.46	1.28

Table 2

Regression Analyses for RBPC and Dependent Variables

Variable	R	Beta	F(10,100)	p	Mult R	p
Control						
Age	.004	.047	.341	.561		
Time	.005	-.023	.199	.657	.073	.749
Network Quality						
Other Adults	.213	-.152	2.263	.136		
Father	.223	.126	1.812	.181		
Peers	.272	-.211	4.457	.037		
Mother	.347	-.378	11.947	.001	.589	.000
Network Frequency						
Mother	.354	.080	.786	.377		
Other Adults	.354	-.008	.007	.931		
Father	.357	-.064	.465	.497		
Peers	.359	.053	.283	.596	.599	.000

NOTE: Control variables were entered simultaneously in the first step, network quality variables were entered simultaneously in the second step, and network frequency variables were entered simultaneously in the third step.

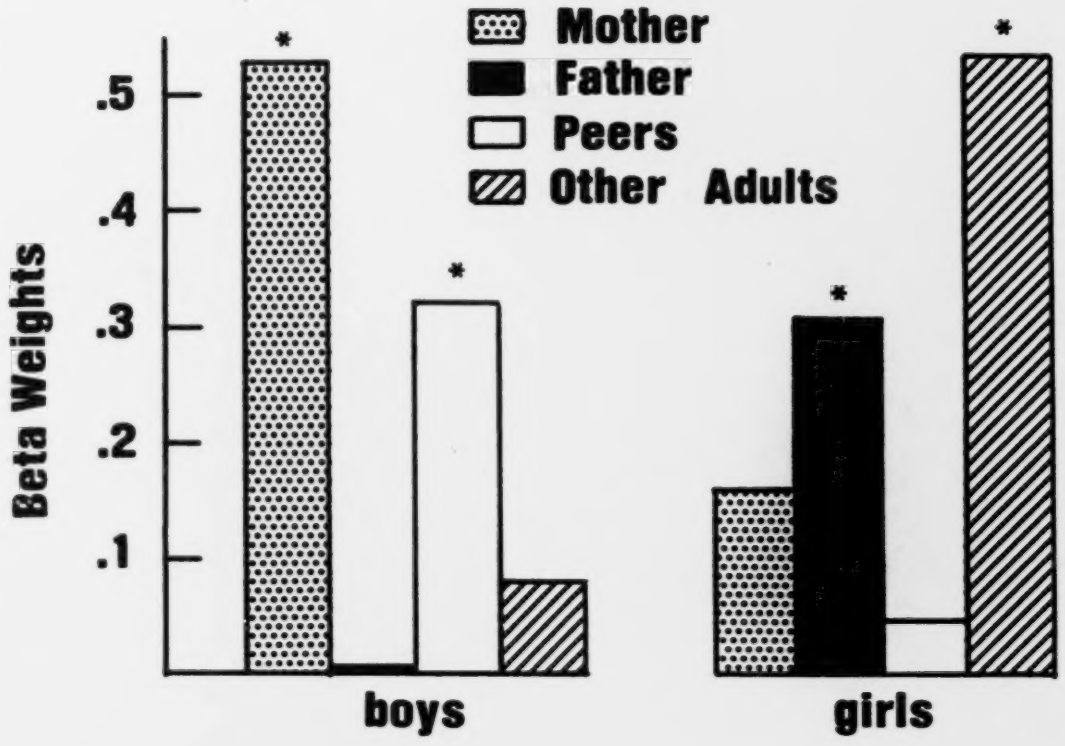
Table 3

Regression Analyses for CDI and Dependent Variables

Variable	R^2	Beta	$F(10,80)$	p	Mult R	p
Control						
Age	000	.061	.130	.719		
Time	.040	.170	3.667	.059	.200	.165
Network Quality						
Father	208	.069	.011	.917		
Mother	.222	.198	2.073	.154		
Peers	.241	-.192	2.105	.151		
Other Adults	.208	-.465	9.957	.002	.491	.001
Network Frequency						
Father	.273	-.129	1.211	.274		
Mother	.243	-.021	.038	.846		
Peers	.273	.022	.035	.853		
Other Adults	.262	.175	2.404	.125	.523	.003

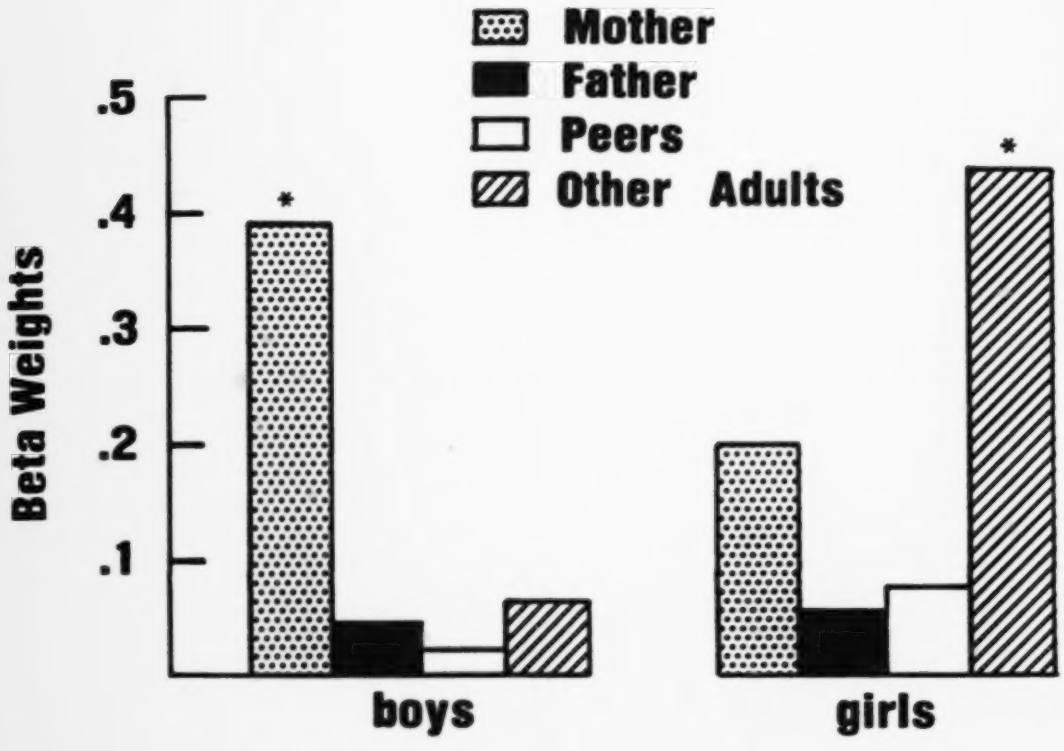
NOTE: Control variables were entered simultaneously in the first step, network quality variables were entered simultaneously in the second step, and network frequency variables were entered simultaneously in the third step.

Figure 1.
NETWORK QUALITY BETA WEIGHTS FOR RBPC



* = significant beta weight

Figure 2.
NETWORK QUALITY BETA WEIGHTS FOR CDI



* = significant beta weight